Welcome to this audio description introduction to My Neighbour Totoro.

The celebrated 1988 animated feature film by **Hayao Miyazaki** is brought to the stage by its original composer **Joe Hisaishi** and the **Royal Shakespeare Company** in collaboration with **Improbable** and **Nippon TV**.

The adaptation for the stage was written by **Tom Morton-Smith.**

Artwork for the stage adaptation of *My Neighbour Totoro* includes a hand drawn title by **Toshio Suzuki**, Producer for Studio Ghibli, who was involved in the planning and production of the original animated film.

This performance will last about two hours and 45 minutes including one, 20 minute, interval.

**SET**

My Neighbour Totoro takes place in 1955 in rural Japan but within reach of Tokyo by a bus and train journey. Despite that, it feels remote; a place of forests and green fields, rice paddies and farmsteads.

This spectacular production makes full use of the whole vast expanse of the wide Barbican Theatre stage and, unusually, the stage’s great depth is also exposed, making room for the large orchestra to be accommodated at its rear.

The style of the production sits playfully between painted flat scenery that directly references the original animation artwork, and more realistic, life sized 3-dimensional structures. Nearly every element of the design can be moved and manipulated by the performers who combine the offices of puppeteer and stagehand. Their skills bring the world of the play to life in every sense.

The woods are ever present, with the live band placed on a series of rope-and-plank tree houses at the very rear of the space, and flat, cut-out tree branches framing the space high up on both sides.

The action mostly takes place in and around the old house that the Kusakabes are moving into. It is a traditional Japanese rural building made of *shoji* panels - simple warm white rice paper and wooden frame panels that slide apart to create doorways. The house is life-sized and formed of two main sections - a wide one-storey section with sloping tiled roof that forms the main living and sleeping space, and a smaller square front entrance section placed towards the left end of the living space, which has an attic level in a pitched roof. The roof is simply decorated at its peak with stacked wood details and little pointed pinnacles. The attic is accessed by an open-tread staircase that runs up from Tatsuo's study on the ground floor. The study contains a utilitarian wooden desk and chair, and piles of books and paperwork. This front section also has a square porch front, where two stocky uprights support heavy beams. One of the uprights is rather rotten and unsteady.

The whole house is on a revolve, so scene changes or passing time are all implied by spinning the house slowly past us. The revolve also works to keep up with characters as they explore inside the house.

The house comes apart in several sections, and free-standing shoji panels can also be moved around too. By separating and spinning the sections or sliding the panels across the space, the performers create other locations such as a hospital room with an industrial-looking green wrought-iron bed, or other houses in the neighbourhood.

The house has a large garden, where an old water-pump sits under a rickety roof. The pump has a cylindrical base, a large wrought-iron hand-operated lever, and a big, squat, wooden wash-tub set below the tap. Positioned on the edge of the village, the garden meets the woods.

These woods form the other main location in this story. The focus of the woods is a huge old camphor tree, growing on the border of the Kusakabes’ garden. This tree is sometimes present as a broad, painted cut-out trunk, whose branches are high up beyond the frame of the space. At the base of the camphor tree are two moss-covered small stone shrines made of carved stones. The trunk itself is decorated with ribbons hanging from ropes. More painted cut-out trees encroach from both sides, their bare branches looming in above, and knotty roots below forming an earthy tunnel where butterflies flutter through shafts of sunlight.

Other locations are created by the puppeteers, who slide in long strips of grass or reeds as they plant rice or work the fields, construct bamboo frames to dry laundry, or spin on furniture, bus stop signs or roadside shrines as the action demands.

Silhouetting the musicians, a screen right at the back holds projected elements such as a huge glowing full moon, twinkling stars, or deep purple-red sunsets. Projections are also used to enhance the woods, animating tree trunks with blossoming flowers or eerie rippling light. The floor is completely covered with a weathered wooden floorboard effect, and level right across the space.

**CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES**

Central to the production is the team of twenty puppeteers, who, as well as manipulating the many and various puppets, also operate as stage hands, physically moving props as well as assembling and reconfiguring the elements of the various houses and other buildings visited by the characters.

Large puppets are worked from both inside and out and the puppeteers are visible as they deftly articulate them. They are also seen as they move flying insects, birds and other animals. The eye registers their presence but so skilful are their operations, and so dazzling and delightful the puppets themselves, that the theatrical illusion is unaffected by our awareness of the mechanism of its creation; it’s the creatures themselves we respond to and remember, not their operators.

The puppeteers are dressed in costumes which are derived from two Japanese theatrical traditions: the stage hands of Kabuki theatre and the operators of Bunraku puppets who remain visible to the audience.

They have been named *kazego* for this production, literally meaning ‘wind clothes’ but used here to denote the wind spirits themselves.

They wear long-sleeved, v-necked cross-over shirts and wide-legged, ankle-length trousers. The flowing silk fabric is dyed a very deep indigo blue. On their heads are matching silk hoods which cover their hair and extend down over the napes of their necks. These hoods can be worn either in ‘hidden’ position, in which a veil is pulled down to obscure the face, or in ‘open’ position in which the veil is drawn up leaving the face exposed. Occasionally they are removed completely. On their feet are split-toed tabi boots.

Some members of this team also play various named parts as well as unnamed villagers, messengers and passers-by. For these parts they usually change their *kazego* costumes for that of the characters they represent, but sometimes the simple removal of the hood indicates a change of character.

Our story begins with Tatsuo Kusakabe and his two daughters, Satsuki and Mei, moving from their Tokyo home to the countryside in order to be closer to Yasuko, his wife, who is recovering from tuberculosis in a nearby hospital.

Tatsuo and the girls are in Western-style clothes but Yasuko wears more traditional Japanese garments.

**Tatsuo**, a university professor, is a tall, attractive man in his thirties with a benign but faintly preoccupied and absent-minded air. His pleasant face is clean-shaven and dominated by heavy, black-rimmed spectacles. His straight black hair flops over his forehead from a centre parting. He wears a plain white shirt with a v-necked, zip-up, pale blue sleeveless pullover on top. He has cream-coloured cotton trousers and suede shoes.

For more formal occasions he wears a cream, two-piece linen suit with a white shirt and a tie and carries a brown leather briefcase.

**Satsuki,** the elder of his two daughters, is about 10. Pretty, with dark, wavy hair cut short, she is a bright, sensible girl whose natural high spirits are tempered by the responsibility of being the older sister and that of having lately had to take her mother’s place in the household during her absence in hospital.

The word ‘Satsuki’ means rhododendron and she is dressed in the bright, sunny colours of spring flowers. She is first seen in a tangerine-coloured, knee-length, waisted frock, square-necked and sleeveless, with a plain bodice and full skirt. Later she has a similar dress in a stronger orange colour.

Both dresses are worn with matching, flat-soled, patent-leather sandals.

At night she has yellow pyjamas.

When Satsuki goes to school her uniform is a v-necked, short-sleeved white shirt and pleated, light-blue skirt with straps and matching blue canvas shoes. She carries her books in a bright red backpack.

Four year old **Mei** is always close on Satsuki’s heels, desperate not to be left behind. She’s frank and friendly, always ready to share her toffees, even with strangers. Her sweet, round face can light up with delight or darken with frustration or distress, and change from one to the other all in a moment.

The name ‘Mei’ means the month of May, and the little girl always wears fresh, bright pink. Her dress has a white, Peter Pan collar and its full skirt only reaches to mid-thigh allowing glimpses of her lace-trimmed white bloomers.

Later she appears in a pinafore-dress version worn over a pretty white blouse with puffed, short sleeves.

Her hair is worn in short bunches, fastened with bright pink bobbles, and her shoes are pink, too, slip-on canvas sneakers, with an elasticated insert at the front, or pink sandals.

Sometimes she adds a little straw hat trimmed with pink ribbon held on by elastic under the chin and carries a yellow, satchel-shaped leather bag, its strap worn across her chest.

When it rains, Mei has a shocking-pink mackintosh with a hood and matching wellington boots.

Mei’s nightdress is as pink as all her other clothes.

**Yasuko Kusakabe**, the girls’ mother is confined to the tubercular ward in the local hospital. She’s a small, delicately made woman in her early thirties, very composed and still, but with an eager, intelligent expression, always anxious for news from home.

Her long dark hair is parted in the middle and hangs in a long, silky mass over one shoulder as far as her waist.

Her beautiful Japanese clothes, flowing *yukata*, a less formal kimono-style garment, and a loose jacket on top are all in delicately patterned, subtle, hydrangea colours: lavenders, lilacs and pale pinks

The first people the Kusakabes meet when they arrive in the village of Mātsugo are their farming neighbours the Ōgaki family.

The Ōgakis, like the other villagers, wear traditional Japanese clothes. The Ōgakis favour the greens and yellows of Spring vegetables while the other villagers are in various indigo shades, patterned and plain.

Modern dyeing techniques in the RSC workshops have triumphantly reproduced the beautiful effects of the painstaking artisan methods of traditional Japanese fabric production.

Everyone wears *zori*, Japanese flip-flop-type sandals with woven or wooden soles. Feet are either bare or in divided-toe tabi socks.

**Granny**, who has been helping to prepare the house for the Kusakabes’ arrival, is a warm, wise, motherly woman of about sixty. She quickly becomes a friend to Satsuki and Mei.

Her comfortable, well worn clothes are in shades of sweetcorn yellow and sage green printed with a delicate pattern. She has a wide-sleeved, cross-over top tucked into baggy trousers, of a slightly darker green, which are tight at the ankle. One sleeve is patterned, one plain. A rectangular piece of fabric, with the same pattern but in a warm biscuit colour, is wrapped round and tied at the waist to serve as an apron. A printed cotton handkerchief covers her grey hair worn in a tidy bun. A wide straw hat is either worn on top or hangs from its cord on her back.

Her son is **Hiroshi**, a tall, vigorous man in his late thirties with a bald head and a neat moustache and goatee beard. He wears a v-necked shirt tucked into his baggy sea-green trousers, tight at the ankle. A white fabric band is tied round his head.

His wife is **Tsūkiko**, small and slight, with a lively personality. She wears the same clothes as Granny - shirt, trousers and apron - but the colours, though still yellows and greens, are a little brighter and sharper and have a stylised bamboo pattern in white.

Their son, **Kanta**, is about the same age as Satsuki but a little taller. He’s painfully shy and tongue-tied, conversing initially only in inarticulate grunts and grimaces before eventually finding his voice.

A wiry boy with short, black hair and an intense expression, he is the only one of his family to wear Western style clothes.

He is dressed in a beautifully starched and ironed short-sleeved white shirt tucked into smart, tailored, beige knee-length shorts. He has a white cap with a shiny black peak.

His school uniform is almost identical except that the shorts and peaked cap are of the same blue as Satsuki’s skirt. He carries a black backpack.

At the hospital we meet **Nurse Ēmiko** who is looking after Yasuko. A sturdy, forthright woman, she wears a Western-style uniform of a full-skirted, button-through, waisted, white dress. A white cap is perched on the back of her head and flat white pumps are on her feet.

Satsuki’s and Kanta’s teacher at school is **Miss Hara.** She is a kindly, sensible woman of about forty who also wears western clothes.

Her dark hair is worn drawn back into a large bun at the nape of her neck.

She is dressed in a pretty, white, high-necked, long-sleeved blouse and an ankle-length dark pink, full skirt.

Her feet are in white ankle socks and sensible flat, lace-up white shoes.

**PUPPET CHARACTERS**

**Totoro** is a big hug of a creature. He is all belly and pale grey woolly fur. He has a white tummy and expressive pointy ears. His round head has big eyes that he often half-closes in a friendly smile, and a grin as wide as his whole face. He has a flat black nose like a cat, and thick black whiskers that flick up and down when he's pleased or intrigued. Totoro has a huge mouth, which he opens when he roars, displaying a big pink tongue and two rows of chunky white teeth. His wide arms and stumpy legs end in long black claws and black pads. Totoro can change his size, appearing sometimes as big as the Kusakabes’ house, and at other moments about twice the size of an average grown-up.

Totoro has two companions. The smaller of the two is **Shōtotoro**, a white furry animal, rather rabbit-like in shape and about a foot tall. He has long ears which stick up and large, round eyes. He walks upright on tiny legs with pink clawed feet. Of a nervous disposition, he can scuttle out of sight at top speed when alarmed.

**Chūtotoro** is a little larger and bulkier. His fur is bright blue with a round white tummy, and he has huge eyes and a shiny black nose. He is a little bolder than Shōtotoro, and his stumpy legs can move surprisingly fast. He sometimes carries a rough hemp sack over one shoulder, in which he collects tasty treats.

Each of these is operated by one of the *Kazego*.

The **Soot Sprites** are mischievous creatures which gather in empty houses. They are small, black, fluffy and feathery, like animated ink blots, and hurtle frantically about a room when disturbed. They move more slowly and gracefully when outside however, flocking together like murmurations of starlings. The *Kazego* move them with long, slender, flexible poles rather like fishing rods. Similar poles are used to animate the butterflies and fireflies encountered by Satsuki and Mei.

Kanta looks after a flock of busybody **Chickens** on his parents’ farm. The *Kazego* move them in an astonishingly lifelike way, scuttling them to and fro to peck at grain, while at the same time providing their clucks and squawks which Kanta perfectly understands.

On her travels Mei encounters a splendid **Goat**. Three *Kazego* operate the hungry animal, ever on the lookout for a snack, and supply her bleats. The goat has slightly mangy white fur, and beneath two curved horns looks out with bulging yellow eyes.

The **Catbus** obligingly provides transport for Totoro himself and sometimes for his neighbours, too. This magnificent vehicle is the size of an actual single-decker school bus. The front is an enormous ginger cat’s face with a Cheshire Cat grin. Its eyes are the headlights whose beams can be seen sweeping the countryside from miles away as it hurtles through the air. Instead of wheels it has six legs on each side and its stripy tail sticks out at the rear.

There are five windows on each side and a wide rear window.

The illuminated destination board at the front tells us where the catbus is heading. A team of *Kazego* skilfully manage the speedy, graceful movements of the bus.

Tail lights are provided by the red eyes of two rats which are fastened on either side of the rear window. The bus utters occasional miaows.

The musicians, placed in elevated platforms at the back of the stage, are imagined as tree, rather than as wind, spirits. They wear similar costumes but the colours are forest-like greens and browns and have no hoods. The singer, similarly dressed, usually performs from a platform at the rear of the stage but occasionally descends to stage level.

The entire company is made up of British East and South East Asian performers.

Ten year old Satsuki and four year old Mei Kusakabe are played by adult actors: **Ami Okumura Jones** and **Mei Mac**. Their father, Tatsuo, is played by **Dai** **Tabuchi** and their mother, Yasuko, by **Emily Piggford**.

Their neighbours, the Ōgaki family are:

Granny, played by **Jacqueline Tate**

Hiroshi, the father, played by **Andrew Futaishi**

Tsukiko, the mother, played by **Naomi Yang** and

Kanta, their son, by **Ka Long Kelvin Chan**

Nurse Emiko, who looks after Yasuko at the TB hospital, is played by **Amanda Maud** and

Miss Hara, Satsuki’s teacher at the local school, by **Arina Li**

The singer is **Ai Ninomiya.**

The puppeteers are:

**Jessie Baek**

**Jasmine Bayes**

**Boaz Chad,**

**Jasmine Chiu**

**Elizabeth Chu**

**Andrew Futaishi**

**Yojiro Ichikawa**

**Anna Kato**

**Heather Lai**

**Matthew Leonhart**

**Yuki Nitta**

**Bright Ong**

**Mark Takeshi Ota**

**Daniel Phung**

**Si Rawlinson**

**Gun Suen**

**Dai Tabuchi**

**Jacqueline Tate and**

**Shaofan Wilson**

The production was designed by **Tom Pye** with costumes by **Kimie Nakano** and lighting by Jessica Hung Han Yun.

Puppetry is by **Basil Twist**.

Joe Hisaishi’s film score has been newly orchestrated by **Will** **Stuart** and is performed live with the musicians visible at the rear of the stage.

The audio describers today, in order of speaking, are **Ess Grange** and **Ellie Packer**.

The director is **Phelim McDermott.**